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Navigating Autonomy: A Mid-Career Reflection on Life in Academia

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a mid-career reflection on life in academia. Using a feminist-existentialist-Buddhist lens, I acknowledge structural and societal obstacles while embracing my sense of agency. I elucidate challenges I faced related to adjustable perspectives and learnable skills, and I offer insights and strategies related to time management, discipline, persistence, and facing inner demons. Finally, I share my vision for the remainder of my career in terms of intervention research, mentoring, and dissemination efforts.

KEYWORDS

Feminist psychology; persistence; time management; women in academia

In the summer of 2014, I became a Full Professor. I was likely halfway through my career: I had received my Ph.D. 16 years prior, and I could imagine retiring 16 years hence. This moment offered me a unique vantage point to survey the landscape of my career. Honestly, though, I think about my career frequently. I am at an institution that has post-tenure review, so faculty members assemble their accomplishments every two to five years for their entire career. Colleagues who review my materials witness the manuscripts that were accepted for publication, the grants that I received, the graduate students I successfully mentored through their doctoral studies, the teaching evaluations, and the various campus, community, and professional leadership positions I have held.

At this point in my career, my case looks pretty good—good enough to win awards and earn Fellow status in five Divisions of the American Psychological Association. From the outside, the successes are apparent. From my perspective, however, my dossier is a mixed bag. It is not that I do not recognize the accomplishments. In fact, I cling to them, tracking my citations, my Research Gate score, the number of views of my TED Talk. I suspect this helps me to persist through bouts of self-doubt because what I am painfully aware of, and what you may not see, are the

struggles: the disappointments, the unfinished projects, the grants that were not funded, and the disaster that is my email inbox.

I view my career path through the lens of my feminist-existentialist-Buddhist theoretical orientation. I was introduced to existential psychology (Yalom, 1980) in graduate school and immediately gravitated toward the deep issues of meaning and identity and especially the tension between freedom and responsibility. Yet, having been a Women's Studies major in college, I was aware that freedom is not the same for all people in our society. I had personal and academic knowledge of the structural inequities that favor some people and create barriers for others. I integrate these theories by recognizing that freedom is shaped and limited by external forces and yet we are at our best when we can recognize the extent of our freedom and embrace responsibility within the scope of that freedom. If Victor Frankl (1992) can find meaning in a concentration camp, I can engage my agency within a patriarchal, racist, heterosexist society. My Buddhist practice and philosophy helps to keep me humble and to deepen my compassion for others and for myself. I experience my professional journey and write this article drawing on these frameworks of existentialism, feminism, and Buddhism.

As an outspoken biracial, bisexual, feminist woman of color who does qualitative, quantitative, and community-based research on LGBTQ issues, you might guess that the obstacles in my academic path would be numerous. True, I can identify challenges I encountered due to these characteristics, but fortunately, there have been only a few bumps related to things I cannot or do not want to change. I do not want to underplay the significant barriers encountered by women of color and queer women in academia. Although there have been a few times I would attribute difficulties in my professional life to these characteristics, unlike many other underrepresented academics, my identity characteristics have by no means been the defining feature of my professional hurdles and potholes. My good fortune is likely due, at least in part, to my privilege as a light-skinned, cisgender, currently able-bodied, U.S.-born citizen who was raised with economic and educational resources. I am not the first Professor Israel in my family, and I have no doubt that, as the daughter of academics, I had a considerable head start to success in academia. Furthermore, having chosen not to have children and with the good fortune of supportive partners, I have avoided some of the work-life conflicts that women typically encounter.

In this articulation of my privilege and the consequent freedoms, my acknowledgement of existential responsibility may be evident. There are undoubtedly stories to tell about societal forces that impinged on my freedom, about microaggressions, about dearth of role models like myself, of professional demands on an isolated queer woman of color in academia.

Indeed, I wrote such narratives earlier in my career (Israel, 2002; Israel, 2004). Yet, at this moment, these are not the stories I choose to tell. I choose to tell stories that help me embrace my agency, even as they encourage me to reflect on responsibility, not only for my successes, but for ways that I limited myself, as well. As a feminist, I feel like I have a clearer narrative for how to frame my experience in terms of how I have been limited by oppressive societal structures rather than in terms of my contributions to my own foibles. Do we have a language for individual responsibility that does not lead to victim blaming? Can I recognize my poor choices without implying that women of color should shoulder the barriers that limit their lives? Can I offer ideas about ways women can be more successful in academia without diminishing those who are not? I sense an imposition of the patriarchy that discourages me from claiming responsibility for fear that it will be misinterpreted, that it will give license to those who blame the victims of oppression for not succeeding. Rather than be limited by concern that my narrative will be misused, I prefer to claim my power to tell my story in a way that embraces my responsibility. I entrust the reader not to use my narrative to ignore the barriers I and other women face, not to use my narrative as a weapon against LGBT people, people of color, and other marginalized groups. Rather, I hope the reader will gain insight and offer the support underrepresented people need to succeed.

More significant impediments to success than my marginalized statuses have been the challenges related to adjustable perspectives and learnable skills. There are things I have learned along the way that I wish I knew earlier. I feel vulnerable revealing my foibles, but as a Full Professor, my vulnerability is likely a feeling more than a reality, and I think I may be able to offer some insight from my experience that will help others navigate their own path smoothly or at least normalize the bumps along the way.

My greatest regrets about my career thus far are the research projects I failed to publish early in my career. I managed to finish most of them and submit them for publication, but when the revise and resubmit came back, I lacked the time, discipline, and confidence in my abilities as a researcher to take these projects over the finish line. Over time, I managed to strengthen the muscles that are essential to persistence in an academic career, as well as in other careers and roles. I suspect that they are particularly relevant to any area of life in which there is some degree of autonomy or control over how you spend your time, including graduate school, administration, leadership, and creative work.

Autonomy is simultaneously highly desirable and uniquely challenging. In anticipation of becoming department chair, I met with faculty members and asked what they like and dislike about their job. They unanimously

valued autonomy. The flexibility to do what we want when we want is a benefit that cannot be measured in monetary terms. It is freedom, and it communicates that we are trusted to make good decisions on our own. I often joke that it is wonderful to have autonomy, so I can *choose* to work 50 or more hours per week. In truth, I do not find that faculty exploit the autonomy. We do not enjoy slacking. If we appear to be slacking, it is typically avoidance behavior coupled with intense guilt for not getting our work done. I have found that, to succeed in a position with tremendous autonomy, I needed to develop strong time management skills, discipline, and persistence—and I needed to face my inner demons.

Time Management

As a faculty member, so little of my time is accounted for. My calendar reflects time in the classroom (somewhere between zero and six hours per week), meetings with colleagues (on campus or via teleconference), research team meetings, and one-on-one mentoring sessions with students; however, most of my time is unscheduled. Before I became a professor, I wondered how I would fill the rest of my time. I did not have to worry—there is always plenty to do, including writing manuscripts, grading, preparing conference proposals, course preparation, offering feedback on multiple drafts of dissertations, writing letters of recommendation, preparing for meetings, evaluating colleagues, reviewing manuscripts, establishing research collaborations, and email, email, email. With so many tasks and so little structure, time management is key.

In the process of writing this article, I reflected on what multicultural feminist time management might be, or how time management could be informed by social identities and feminist values. What stands out prominently is parenting, specifically the expectations and realities for women who are parents. I am not a parent, but I am aware that, for women, parenting typically requires a “second shift” of work beyond paid employment. The other piece of time management that seems to differentially affect people who are underrepresented in their workplace (e.g., women, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ people) is the press to represent, role model, and mentor their identity groups. Such activities are often in the context of service roles that offer little institutional reward, although I have chosen to embrace these opportunities at times for reasons of professional growth, access, or values. It is because of these additional pressures that time management is particularly important for underrepresented workers.

Because no one ever taught me how to manage my time well, I began my academic career ill-equipped to structure my own time. It is not clear to me how other academics gained time management skills, but I have

found some of the most helpful guidance in resources that seem targeted for the business world. Julie Morgenstern has become my go-to resource for managing my time and space. *Time Management from the Inside Out* (Morgenstern, 2004) was particularly valuable in providing tools to conceptualize my time as a resource and organize my schedule effectively. Combined with the wisdom of my Aunt Judy that “everything takes time,” I have been able to anticipate the impact on my time of any given activity. Recognizing that time put into any activity will affect time available for other activities helps me to prioritize, to make decisions about what I will do and what I will not do, and how much of my time I will spend doing these things.

I have sometimes found it challenging to allocate my time consistent with priorities, often setting aside tasks that will help me accomplish my goals and instead attending to those that require immediate attention. This pull to urgent, rather than important, tasks can be a significant barrier to effective time management (Covey, 2014). The important, but not urgent, item on every faculty member’s plate is writing. In order to keep our job, advance in our career, and contribute to our field, we need to write. Depending on the project, there are various necessary steps prior to writing (e.g., collecting and analyzing data, reviewing archived materials), and these steps may have varied degrees of structure, but the writing itself tends to be largely unstructured. It is definitely important for accomplishing long-term goals, but it rarely has externally imposed deadlines on a daily or weekly, or even monthly, basis, which makes it difficult to keep on the front burner. I have found the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity (n.d.) to be a great resource for helping faculty prioritize and structure their time. This organization offers clear guidance, tools, and community that promote faculty success. Every Monday, I receive an email from Kerry Ann Rockquemore, the organization’s founder, who is also a woman of color. She offers practical tips for academic success. I appreciate access, not only to narratives that describe barriers women of color encounter within academia, but also to models of women of color who decode the system and explain how to succeed within it.

Beyond making time for writing, I have needed to make choices about which writing projects I take on. For example, early in my career, invitations to write book chapters seemed appealing. I was flattered to be asked, and they were a guaranteed publication. However, I discovered that, because they had externally imposed deadlines, I tended to prioritize them over research manuscripts. For several years after this realization, I refused every book chapter invitation, and I was able to make progress on getting my research published. I have also had to weigh the benefits of writing grant applications (funding for research, funding for students, teaching and

modeling grant writing for students) with the time they take from writing for publication, and I have made different choices depending on my stage of career, potential fundability of projects, and size of backlog of writing projects.

Saying no and adhering to my priorities can be challenging, especially when I am enthusiastic about the request or feel bad about declining it. In order to keep my enthusiasm from overloading my commitments, I implement a 24-hour waiting period before I agree to a request. I know other professionals who have a buddy system in which they check with each other if they are thinking about taking on something new. It may be particularly important for early career professionals to have support in declining opportunities, especially if the requests come from more senior colleagues, and it may be most effective to enlist the help of someone who has an interest in your professional development and does not have an interest in the project or role you are being asked to take on.

One key to structuring my time has been to estimate how long tasks will take and block out appropriate time for them in my schedule. I started this habit several years ago, scheduling time, not only for appointments with other people, but for each task I need to complete. If I do not get it done at the scheduled time, I need to move it to another time slot. This process was initially a very helpful diagnostic. I found that I completely underestimated how long anything would take to complete. Over time, however, my estimates have improved. I have also learned to be as specific as possible in defining the tasks. For example, “update references in introduction” will likely be a more productive and less overwhelming task than “work on manuscript.”

Pro tip: do not completely fill up your schedule. If you block out time for tasks you need to complete, be careful not to fill your entire week, including evenings and weekends as this will become problematic when things come up that need your attention. There will always be opportunities, crises, emails that require a response, revise and resubmits, and if you do not have space in your schedule to deal with them, you will end up losing sleep, ignoring significant others, and things will fall through the cracks.

I would like to offer one final insight I gained about time management and priorities. I found that there are unlimited opportunities for leadership on campus, in professional organizations, and in my community and that these roles gave me opportunities to draw on skills and feel reinforced in ways that are not present in my research and teaching. I also found that these positions absorb as much time as I am willing to give them. It was helpful for me to recognize what I was getting out of participating in leadership and consider how it fit into my priorities at various points in my

career. It is not always a good time to take on responsibilities with built-in meetings and deadlines, as these tend to invade scholarly writing time. Nonetheless, it may be equally important not to deprive yourself of opportunities to engage with colleagues and contribute to the field through leadership. Underrepresented people may feel a particular pull to take on leadership roles for the benefit and visibility of their group. I have found it helpful to keep timing and ability to manage other important, but not urgent, responsibilities in mind.

Recognizing the challenges I have faced in my career related to time management, I try to help my advisees develop these skills. I do not think it is necessary for everyone to use the same tools that work for me, so I may offer a range of strategies. Ultimately, I want to make sure students complete their doctoral degrees equipped with the ability to manage time effectively in academic environments.

Discipline

Shortly after I received tenure, I was granted a full-year sabbatical. I spent a great deal of that year sitting at my dining room table, laptop open, staring at the screen. I had seven manuscripts in progress, six additional projects underway, eight doctoral advisees, a federal grant proposal to resubmit, and a community-based participatory research project to get underway. I felt overwhelmed. I spent a great deal of time wondering why I was having trouble writing. I read about writing, about procrastination, about how to develop a personal mission statement. I spent my days drinking herbal tea, organizing my email, and agonizing about how little I was accomplishing. To be fair, I did end up accomplishing some of the goals in my sabbatical plan, but I also found many distractions, including acting in a play and organizing a political campaign.

I had not mastered the art of discipline several years into a faculty position, and I still struggle with it. Although time management provides the space in my schedule for the tasks that would help me accomplish my goals, I still need to make good use of this time. I need to actually write—not read email or Twitter, not phone a friend, not check the schedule at the yoga center or the daily soup specials on campus or the weather where my friend lives, not bake muffins or take pictures of my cat (if I am working at home), not plan my next vacation. It turns out an endless supply of distractions is readily available. Although I might end up doing something worthwhile, like respond to email, it is still not what I intended to do during my valuable writing time.

There is a saying, “discipline is choosing between what you want now and what you want most” (Kantra, 2010). When I first heard this, I wrote

it on a post-it note and stuck in on my computer as a reminder that, even if right now I want to check Facebook, what I want most is to complete the writing project that is in front of me. I learned some helpful strategies through my Buddhist practice, focusing the mind in meditation. When a thought arises, I notice it, and rather than follow that thought, I lightly acknowledge it and then go back to attending to the breath. Similarly, when distractions come up, I note them as distractions and then go back to what matters most. I might even jot a thought down so I can get back to it later, but I try not to interrupt my work to focus on it right then.

I will admit that it has taken me a long time to learn discipline, and some days I am better at this than others. I had cultivated a lot of bad habits over the years, so I have had to retrain myself. I spent some time early in my career asking productive colleagues what helped them write. I found that each has a structure of when they write and where. The rituals were all different, but each one had a time and a place and a way of getting started. Probably the best ritual I started was writing days with a colleague. We try to hold one day per week where she can come to my house and we can each work on our writing projects. It has become more challenging as we have both become department chairs, but her company has supported my focus and productivity over the years.

I have sometimes fallen into the trap of thinking that a distraction is actually a strategy to promote discipline. For example, is reading about procrastination a way to learn not to procrastinate or an example of procrastination? For me, the distinction has to do with the context in which I participate in the activity. If I decide to spend some time setting up my work structure and habits, and I read a great online article about procrastination (e.g., Urban, 2013) in this time frame, that is different from thinking in the middle of my writing time that I should read about procrastination and stopping in the middle of writing a paragraph to search the Internet and spend an hour reading articles about procrastination before I get back to writing. It has been most helpful to me to create some space in my schedule to focus on establishing good work habits rather than to interrupt my work to do so.

Inner Demons

Autonomy provides fertile ground for inner demons to surface. I warn my doctoral students that they will encounter their inner demons during their time in graduate school, and I encourage them to get to know their demons so they can recognize them and minimize their ability to impede students' journeys. Of course, I know this from experience, from my own, as well as from accompanying many students through the process.

I once said to a colleague who had done research on perfectionism, “I can’t be a perfectionist. If I were, my work would be much higher quality.” He replied, “That’s the definition of perfectionism.” Until that moment, I had no idea that perfectionism might be the culprit that prevented me from writing the highly imperfect first draft and made the multiple revisions so painful. My conflicting feelings about getting published came into greater focus. Although I had a fear of failing, I had an equally powerful fear of succeeding—of getting something published and never being able to change what I wrote, about getting criticized for it, of someone finding a huge flaw. Recognizing my perfectionism was a tremendous insight. Before that, I would stare at the blank screen questioning whether I was really cut out to be a researcher. Once I got to know my perfectionist demon, its power over me dissipated somewhat. When it showed up, I could say, “Oh, that again,” rather than feel paralyzed by it. I could turn my attention from fears that I could not make it as a researcher to strategies for becoming a productive researcher.

I was fortunate enough to have a friend point out my inner demon of perfectionism. There are other strategies and resources that can unearth our demons. I found that *Professors as Writers* (Boice, 1990) offered useful diagnostic tools to identify my specific writing barriers. Not only did I learn about underestimating the time it takes to accomplish a task, but I realized how my impatience set me up to be discouraged.

I want to acknowledge that people from groups that are marginalized in society and underrepresented in academia may have inner demons due to these experiences. For example, impostor syndrome (Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014) is a common experience among underrepresented minorities. I remember the first day of graduate school, hearing the experiences and accomplishments of other students in my cohort and wondering if I belonged, if I could make it. Even after I got my Ph.D. and even tenure, I questioned whether I was really a researcher and considered retreating into administration to avoid facing this question that plagued me. I do not know to what extent my inner demons are related to my target identities, but it may be helpful to consider these contexts when exploring the form and content of inner demons.

I suspect that self-doubt is a common demon among academics, although it is seldom openly expressed. We are constantly describing how valuable our work is in order to provide a rationale for grant applications, book proposals, and conference abstracts. Even in interpersonal settings, I find faculty often forefront their accomplishments and how busy they are with the many demands on their time. It is as if we do not want anyone to think we are not being productive with our largely unstructured time for which there are no witnesses. I wonder how much of this is about trying to

justify our existence to others and how much is to quell our own feelings of inadequacy. Unfortunately, we create a culture that offers little guidance to those who are struggling. I have never heard anyone talk about work they never published, so it is easy to assume everyone else finished everything they started, that I am the only one who abandoned some projects on the cusp of publication. There were people along the way who pointed out that I was not on track with publications and might have offered guidance, but not having heard anyone articulate what I was experiencing, I did not know how to tell them I was struggling. I can reveal my foibles now, but I could not have done it earlier in my career when I was more plagued by doubt. Only now that I am accomplished enough to feel like no one will question my contribution to the field can I admit that I questioned it all along. I hope that by doing so, I can offer some comfort and encouragement to others who are going through this and that by showing my imperfections I can allow others to embrace themselves more fully. Furthermore, I hope my articulation of my inner experiences will encourage mentors and department chairs and other representatives of institutional power to be aware of and responsive to what underrepresented professionals may be experiencing.

Persistence

Academia has many benefits—I get to work with talented colleagues and students, I am able to investigate topics of interest, I am entrusted with educating the next generation, and I have lots of autonomy. Immediate and positive reinforcement, however, are not in the academic benefit package. Although I appear to be adequately rewarded with awards, status, and tenure; most of my accomplishments have taken many years to achieve. In between, there has been ample opportunity to get discouraged—rejections, revisions, grant applications that I worked on nonstop for weeks that did not even get scored. Even the research that does make it into a journal has been through so many drafts and revisions and proofs that, by the time it is actually published, I do not even feel like celebrating. Given this state of affairs, it is easy to see why people give up. I have had to find ways to keep going, to rally my internal and external resources to push forward because persistence is an essential quality for academic success.

I have shared here some of the tools that have helped me to persist: time management, discipline, and dealing with my inner demons. Another ingredient that has been essential to my success has been the companions on my journey. I could not have persisted without colleagues who have shared their strategies and their collaborative engagement, friends and family who support me when I am discouraged and celebrate with me when

I have a win, and students whose hard work and future dreams force me to push forward so they can succeed.

Knowing the importance of persistence and knowing what tools and support are needed to persist is half the battle. My advice to readers is to get these supports in place, so when you hit a bump, it does not derail you. When you have a discouraging writing day, keep going. When you get a rejection from a journal, keep going. When your grant application does not even get scored, keep going. When a student makes snarky comments about your teaching, keep going. Keep going. Keep going. Keep going.

You may wonder if there are times when you should not persist, when you should stop putting energy into a project, when you should look for a different position, when you should exit academia. I do not believe you need to stay the course in all circumstances, but I do think it is best to make an active choice and for good reasons. Consider whether you have tackled time management, mastered discipline, and faced your inner demons—if not, perhaps start there. Something I use to make such choices is my personal mission statement. This tool helps me to determine if I am still on the best course to accomplish what I hope to in my career. My mission statement guides me to invest my energy in activities that will help me reach my long-term goals, and it helps me let go of projects and positions that do not serve my vision. Better not to persist because persistence diverts from my goals than not to persist because I have not managed my time effectively.

Looking to the Future

My mid-career vantage point enabled me to envision the remainder of my career. Awareness of the mortality of my academic life lit a fire within me. The clarity of my vision has brought greater focus and motivation to my research, mentoring, and dissemination efforts.

I have reached out beyond academic journals to disseminate my work. My TED talk on bisexuality has been viewed by over 75,000 people—probably about a thousand times more than the number of people who will read most journal articles I have published. I also started tweeting. Summarizing research in 140 characters is a creative challenge, but useful for distilling the findings and articulating the significance. These activities have helped to connect me with activists and advocates outside of academia, and they have informed my work and made it more relevant to community and to policy makers.

I am aware that I will not be able to finish doing all the research on interventions to support LGBTQ individuals and communities, so I am counting on my advisees to carry on this line of work. I am so proud to

see my advisees, many of whom are first-generation college students, sexual and gender minorities, and people of color, graduate and launch their careers. They and the field and society are more prepared for such research than when I received my degree, and I am quite certain that these talented psychologists will take this field farther than I ever could. I have become crystal clear about articulating my research focus to applicants, teaching my advisees how to conduct intervention research, and modeling a happy, well-rounded academic life so they will want to continue on this path.

I did not think Full Professor status would have a significant impact beyond giving my letters of recommendation more gravitas, but it turned out to be an important moment in my career. It offered me an opportunity to look back and articulate what has helped me get to where I am, and it has injected new energy and focus to the remainder of my career. Academia is not the path for everyone, but it is a path that can be more effectively navigated with time management, discipline, taming of inner demons, and persistence. These may not be the challenges you experience, but if they are, I hope I have offered tools to better equip others for the journey. Moreover, I hope I brought the experience of an academic career to life and inspired women in academia to continue on this arduous, but rewarding, path.

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